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ABSTRACT

This policy digest reviews the current status of state level graduation policies and the inclusion of students with disabilities in more rigorous student accountability measures. The results of two surveys conducted by the Council of Chief State School Officers on the inclusion of students with disabilities in state level graduation requirements are described. Analysis of data indicates: (1) 38 states and territories apply some graduate requirements to students with disabilities; (2) 9 states require that all students must meet all requirements for a standard diploma; (3) 9 states require students with mild disabilities meet all requirements for a diploma; (4) 11 states allow graduation requirements for students with disabilities to be determined locally; (5) and 6 states permit requirements for students with severe disabilities to be determined or waived by students' individualized education programs (IEPs). The surveys also found that while some states have alternative exit documents for students with disabilities, 19 states only offer a standard diploma. Of the 17 states that require students to pass graduation examinations, 13 required students with IEPs to pass the examination in order to receive a standard diploma. Some of the questions policymakers need to consider as they implement more rigorous high school graduation requirements are outlined. (CR)

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POLICY UPDATE

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Students with Disabilities and High School Graduation Policies

Growing concern over the last 15 years that American high school students' achievement is declining has led to the re-examination of the content and rigor of the public school curriculum, as well as the meaning of the high school diploma in relation to the skills and knowledge required to be a successful and informed citizen. Education leaders are examining more rigorous state level graduation requirements, such as higher academic standards, increased coursework, and graduation exams, as ways to increase the level of student learning. **However, a key issue for policymakers as they enact tougher requirements for the diploma is how to include students with disabilities.** The purpose of this policy update is to review the current status of state level graduation policies and the inclusion of students with disabilities in these more rigorous student accountability measures.

Two recent surveys conducted by the Council of Chief State School Officers (Bond, Braskamp & Roeber, 1996; Rhim & McLaughlin, in press) reported data on the inclusion of students with disabilities in state level graduation requirements. Forty-nine of the 55 states and territories reported having high school graduation requirements, while 6 reported that such requirements are determined by local school boards. The degree to which students with disabilities are included in these graduation policies is an important indicator of the extent to which these students are included in current reforms. Below are some results from the CCSSO survey:

- 38 states and territories currently **apply some graduation requirements** to students with disabilities.
- 9 states require that **all students,** regardless of their disability, must **meet all requirements** for a standard diploma.
- Another 9 states reported that **students with mild disabilities must meet all requirements** for a diploma.
- 11 states reported that graduation requirements for all students with disabilities are **determined locally,** guided by students' Individual Educational Programs (IEPs).
- An additional 6 states permit **requirements for students with severe disabilities to be determined or waived by students' IEPs.**

Some states have alternative exit documents such as "certificates of completion" for students with disabilities who do not meet standard graduation requirements. However, 19 states offer only a standard diploma. Requirements for a standard diploma vary across states. In some cases, students with disabilities can receive a standard diploma upon completion of their Individualized Educational Programs. Seventeen states provide a standard diploma or certificate option for students with disabilities, 10 offer a standard or modified diploma, and 4 states provide a range of options including a standard or modified diploma or certificate.

States that require students to pass graduation examinations are similarly divergent regarding their requirements for students with disabilities. Of the 17 states with test requirements, 13 required students with IEPs to pass the state examination in order to receive a standard or state-endorsed diploma. In all 17 states, alternative diplomas or certificates were awarded to students with disabilities who did not take or pass the examination.

Key Policy Questions

Increasing graduation requirements is one part of a larger movement to boost standards and student accountability. This aims to prepare students for an increasingly dynamic and demanding workplace. But many educators are unsure how to include students with disabilities in the new and more rigorous high school graduation requirements. Following are some of the questions policymakers might need to consider as they implement these requirements.

What are the Legal Implications of More Rigorous Graduation Requirements?

The constitutionality of including or excluding students with disabilities from various high school requirements has been tested in the courts. In *Debra P. v. Turlington* (1981), the court found that the high school diploma is a constitutionally protected property right and schools are required to provide sufficient educational opportunities to prepare for a graduation test. While the Debra P. case did not specifically address students with disabilities, it did establish the requirement that items on tests required for graduation correspond to the actual curriculum students receive. In a related case, *Brookhart v. Illinois State Board of Education* (697 F. 2d '79), the court found that students with disabilities could be held to the same graduation requirements as their non-disabled peers but that the school must guarantee students the opportunity to learn the required material. The findings in *Brookhart* are consistent with other federal laws regarding the opportunity to learn for students with disabilities: state level graduation requirements hold the promise of increasing school and student accountability for specific curricula, but districts are responsible for assuring that all students receive an "opportunity to learn" the material for which they are held responsible through graduation requirements.

How Will Tougher Requirements for a Diploma Affect Students with Disabilities?

Research findings overwhelmingly confirm the correlation between educational attainment and future earnings. Additional research has found that "students with disabilities experience significant negative outcomes when they do not earn a high school or equivalent diploma" (Thurlow et al., 1995). At the same time, research on the transition of students with disabilities from school to successful employment has demonstrated these students fare best when they have received adequate concrete job skills in high school (McDonnell, Hardman & Hightower, 1989). But job skills training may not provide a student with the coursework necessary to earn a standard diploma. Thus, policies regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities in tougher graduation requirements must balance these conflicting outcomes: an increased focus on academics may provide more students with disabilities the opportunity to obtain a standard diploma and perhaps even move on to higher education; yet it may deprive others of the specific job skills they need to be successful after high school.

Will Standards Increase the Drop-out Rate for Students with Disabilities?

According to a study by Wagner et al. (1994), approximately 30 percent of students with disabilities who had been enrolled in 9th through 12th grades failed to complete their secondary schooling. With more rigorous graduation standards, there is a possiblity that these dropout rates will increase. In addition, many educators *presume* that students with disabilities cannot meet the new graduation requirements and may unwittingly counsel students into courses that will not lead to graduation, but rather frustration and dropout.

How Can Individual Students' Needs be Balanced with System Accountability?

Accommodating individual student's diverse learning needs within a framework of state standards is difficult and requires, at times, that standards, instruction, and/or assessments be modified. Modifications, however, can make system accountability difficult, as ad hoc adjustments are made at the local level for a variety of pedagogical and pragmatic reasons. Modifications that are defined, sanctioned and monitored at the state level can go a long way toward ensuring that districts and schools provide appropriate modificiations while continuing to hold all students to high standards. States should consider enacting flexible policies to define appropriate modifications in curriculum, testing procedures and test content. By standardizing the modifications that can be used at the local level and collecting data concerning accommodations, states can implement an accountability system that applies fairly to all districts, schools, teachers, and students.

Resources

This Policy Update is based on research conducted by the **Center for Policy Research on the Impact of General and Special Education Reform**, a partnership of NASBE, the Institute for the Study of Exceptional Children and Youth at the Univ. of Maryland, and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the Univ. of Pennsylvania.

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